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Laura Jordan
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Cher Hendricks

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Increasing Sixth Grade Students' Engagement in Literacy Learning

by Laura Jordan and Cher Hendricks

Laura Jordan teaches at Taylor Street Middle School, Griffin, Georgia, and Cher Hendricks at the College of Education at the University of West Georgia, Carrollton, Georgia, U.S.A.

This study is the result of collaboration between a classroom teacher (Laura Jordan) and a university professor (Cher Hendricks). Laura, who completed the initial literature review and collected and analyzed data collected in the field, writes the study in first person. Cher provided assistance in developing the action plan, developing the literature review, and preparing the written study.

Introduction

As a teacher I am often frustrated with the lack of interest and participation that my students exhibit toward classroom activities. The students enrolled in my sixth grade advanced language arts class are particularly difficult to engage in discussions and frequently do not put forth their best efforts in completing assignments. The students' general lack of interest in class content and indifferent attitudes toward learning are a source of frustration to me and have encouraged me to re-evaluate the way I deliver instruction to my students. As a result of my reflections, I discovered that I spend the majority of instructional time lecturing and directing students, as well as giving too few assignments that allow students to express their creativity and individual learning styles.

In light of this realization, I came to the conclusion that I needed to seek a way to engage my students, making learning experiences meaningful and creating in students a spark of excitement for learning. Although in the past I have used cooperative grouping, small-group discussions, and literature circles in my class, all activities and materials were chosen and created by me. In reflecting on my instructional choices, it became clear that the activities I use reflect my personal verbal-linguistic learning style. As I began this project my goal was to determine whether students would take more ownership of their learning and produce higher quality work if they were allowed to choose responsive activities that reflected their individual learning styles.

Review of Literature

The most common reasons found in the literature for student disengagement are lack of innovation in teaching and lack of opportunity for creative response in the classroom (Goodlad, 1984). Goodlad explains that the traditional teaching method of lecturing does not seem to be

effective in promoting student engagement, though students primarily receive instruction through teacher-directed lectures and activities. Further, students most often are required to respond to lecture material through written activities. Goodlad believes that this approach fosters "sleeping brains" in students who complete their education without any other form of intellectual stimulation.

Research reviewed by Smagorinsky and Allen (1998) provides evidence of the importance of engagement, as described by Goodlad. The authors define an engaged reader as one who attempts to enter literary characters' worlds, becoming a part of their thoughts and deeds. They explain that this process can take readers deeper into the texts they read and at the same time allow them to understand themselves better. In their review of the research on schooling, however, Smagorinsky and Allen found that few classrooms provide opportunities for students to connect with presented material in ways that are personally meaningful. Particularly enlightening is their contention that

the school culture disengages students in the area of classroom process, which focuses on the teacher's interests and agendas and allows for few opportunities for students to interact with one another; and it disengages them in the area of assessment, which focuses on their ability to answer factual questions about the texts they read with little attention to the ways in which the information illuminates their own worlds. (p. 516)

Smagorinsky and Allen (1998) provide pedagogical principles for engaging students in literacy learning. First, there must be goal congruence between students and teachers. This means that students and the teacher have the same objectives -- construction of meaning and personal growth -- though the means to those ends may be different for each student. Second, students must be able to choose tools to help them facilitate their understanding, which allows them to create knowledge for themselves and empowers them in their pursuit of this knowledge. Through this process, students learn to set meaningful goals, and they learn to take responsibility for reaching these goals. Last, given the empowering tools students use to become engaged learners, students develop a desire to learn that is intrinsic.

As I considered the idea of students choosing their own tools for learning, I became interested in the idea of creating different tools based on Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. This idea struck me as I read Armstrong (1994), who explains that student engagement can be promoted if students are given the opportunity to receive instruction and choose activities that address their personal learning styles. For this study, I wanted to create a number of assignment options that students could choose from, providing them with an introduction into the process of meaningful engagement in literacy activities that would not be overwhelming to them.

There is a vast amount of literature written on the subject of learning styles, particularly Multiple Intelligence (MI) Theory. The pioneer of Multiple Intelligences, Howard Gardner, identified at least seven basic intelligences that exist in human beings. Gardner (1983) states that learning becomes more meaningful to individuals if they are able to construct meaning in their natural learning environment or through their multiple intelligences. The seven categories of multiple intelligences as defined by Gardner are Verbal-Linguistic, the ability to use words and language effectively; Logical-Mathematical, the ability to learn through numbers, logical relationships,

and patterns; Visual-Spatial, the ability to visualize the world and perceive things accurately; Bodily-Kinesthetic, using the whole body by movement to learn; Musical-Rhythmic, the ability to learn through music, either through expression, sensitivity to pitch, tone, and melody, or through technical musical understanding; Interpersonal, understanding of people and relationships; and Intrapersonal, knowledge of self. Gardner explains that all people possess each of the seven intelligences but that each person's intelligences interact in unique ways.

Goodnough (2001) believes that MI theory provides teachers with a basis for decision-making regarding the creation of meaningful instruction for students, explaining that using MI theory as a classroom tool can benefit both teachers and students. Teachers, Goodnough explains, are able to construct meaningful instruction to help students learn more effectively, and students are able to become more engaged in their own learning process and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to increase student engagement in literacy learning by allowing students to choose the tools they used for learning, including instructional activities and assessment activities. In this study, I provided students with a variety of instructional and assessment activities that reflected the multiple intelligences. Students were allowed to choose the assessment activities they wanted to complete. It was my hope that allowing students more choice in their learning would increase their participation and engagement in the classroom as well as improve their attitudes toward learning. My primary research question research was: How does student choice in learning and assessment activities affect student engagement?

Design of Study

Participants

The student research participants in this study were the twenty-seven sixth grade students currently enrolled in my advanced Language Arts class. Of the twenty-seven, three are African American and twenty-four are Caucasian. All of the students have been identified as advanced, based on standardized test scores from the spring of last school year. These students scored above the 90th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) in Spring 2001.

Setting

The setting of this study was my classroom at a rural middle school in Griffin, Georgia. The school has a current enrollment of 800-plus students in grades six through eight. The racial makeup of the school is 69% White, 30% African-American, and 1% other. My advanced Language Arts class is 88% White and 12% African-American.

Activities

Using the novel *Holes* by Louis Sachar as a class unit, I used student contracts that allowed students to choose literature response activities within their learning styles, which were tied to

MI theory. Within the learning styles framework, I also used cooperative grouping and literature circles to increase student engagement. Students were given the opportunity to provide input on class assignments and materials. Some direct whole group instruction, including class read-alouds and discussions of theme, plot, characterization, and other literary elements, was used as necessary.

Student Contracts

I used student contracts to allow students to choose their own tools for learning. Contracts are student-centered tools that contain a framework of suggested activities from the teacher but are individually designed by students. The suggested activities were based on Multiple Intelligences theory. Students were allowed to choose from a variety of activities that involved the seven intelligences. The first contract contained these activities:

Verbal-Linguistic: 1) Write a letter from Stanley's family to his great-great-grandfather outlining all of the problems his curse has caused to the rest of the family. 2) Pretend you are a yellow-spotted lizard. Write a report about yourself. What kind of climate do you prefer? What do you eat? What are your habits? (etc.)

Logical-Mathematical: 1) Make a chart of the campers at Camp Green Lake. Include their real names, nicknames, physical characteristics, etc. 2) Create an accurate timeline of the events that happen to Stanley until he meets the other campers.

Musical: 1) Campers often sing songs about the camp they are attending. Compose a song that the campers of Camp Green Lake could sing to describe their camp. 2) Write a rap or chant the campers might sing while they are digging their holes.

Visual-Spatial: 1) Make a poster advertising Camp Green Lake. Make it look attractive without telling exactly what it is really like. 2) Draw a comparison of Camp Green Lake as it was in the past and as it is now.

Bodily-Kinesthetic: 1) Build a model of a camper's tent at Camp Green Lake. Include the cots, crates, etc. 2) Do a dramatic re-creation of Stanley's hearing and sentencing (a group of two people).

Interpersonal: 1) Hold a debate to decide if Camp Green Lake or jail would be the better choice for Stanley (group of up to four people). 2) Answer the provided discussion questions as a group.

Intrapersonal: 1) Make a list of 10 vocabulary words of your choosing from chapters 1 - 6. 2) Stanley meets many new people at Camp Green Lake. Pretend you are Stanley and write a reflective journal entry about why a friend will be important during his stay.

I issued this contract to my students during the initial phase of my research project. For each contract, student work was evaluated using a project rubric. Additionally, students had to complete at least seven activities to earn an A. Two activities were non-negotiable; that is, they

were completed in class as a whole group. Students received a grade of B for six projects, C for five projects, and a failing grade for fewer than five projects.

Cooperative Grouping

Students were given a multiple intelligences survey to determine their strongest intelligence areas. Using the survey data, I grouped students homogeneously according to their multiple intelligences. Roles for group members, which included a recorder, gatekeeper, task monitor, editor, and praiser, were discussed and assigned on a rotating schedule. Cooperative groups were used to complete in-class assignments, such as vocabulary building exercises, discussion questions, peer-to-peer reading, and creative responses to literature. Cooperative groups were given a rubric for each assignment but were also allowed the freedom to design their own creative response assignments.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles are small discussion groups formed to allow students to talk with each other to learn more about a literature selection. Students were introduced to the concept by conducting mock discussions. Students were put into groups and given a topic they could readily discuss. While the group was discussing the topic, other students observed and took notes on behaviors that helped the conversation and those that inhibited it. The class then discussed positive and negative behavior for literature circles. Once the literature circles were formed, each student was assigned to read silently and to write one sentence that stood out from each chapter. The students 'jump-started' the literature circle discussion using these sentences. Students were instructed to share their individual interpretations of the literature including why certain passages stood out to them, how the passages related to students' lives, and what students thought, felt, and visualized as they read.

Data Collection

To increase the validity and credibility of my findings, I used multiple methods of data collection. I used observation as my primary means of collecting data. I interviewed students as a way to follow-up my observations. Student work samples were evaluated also. I conducted surveys regarding students' opinions of the unit, which included questions about group work, hands-on activities, student-directed learning, student choice, and other activities.

The majority of collected data came from my daily observations during each class meeting. I observed students working in groups and independently, I sat in on literature circle discussions, and I evaluated student presentations and projects. I used a daily reflection journal to note changes in motivation and engagement as well as problems and successes with the project. Also, each student in the class was interviewed during the unit, and all students participated in a group interview at the end of the project. Students were asked about specific classroom activities, contract projects, and likes and dislikes concerning the unit. They were also asked to provide suggestions for ways to improve the unit.

Results and Interpretations

Engagement Results

Each student completed an initial contract project for the first literacy unit on the book *Holes*. Students brought in models, songs, poems, drawings, and other projects that indicated that they were excited about the activity. The projects, with the exception of two, showed that students had put forth their best efforts. In fact, I noticed that the quality of the work turned in was better than any I had seen so far this year. I interviewed five students to determine what they liked about the assignment. One student, who wrote and performed a rap for her project, told me that the assignment allowed her to express herself in a way that made her comfortable. She also told me the assignment was easy because she loved music and disliked to write or draw. Three of the students indicated that they would like more projects like this. However, one student indicated that he did not like the project because he did not understand what was expected. He said, "I wish you had told us exactly what you wanted us to do. I didn't know what you expected me to turn in."

The quality of students' completed contract projects ranged from excellent to poor. The students who turned in excellent projects had obviously spent a great deal of time studying the literature and preparing their projects. These students were eager to present their projects and share with their peers their individual interpretations of the story. One of the students told me in an interview that she enjoyed being able to do more hands-on work. She said, "I remember things better when I make something instead of just answering questions and memorizing them. It gives me something to look at and think about." In observing the presentations of the students who turned in mediocre projects, I noted that they, too, had spent a great deal of time reading and studying the story, though they did not put as much effort into their projects. In a group interview with three of these students, I learned that they did not fully understand that the contract was only a guideline of the minimum requirements for each project. All three of the students interviewed said they would have put more effort into the project if they had understood that they had the flexibility to go beyond the minimum requirements.

One unexpected theme that materialized from the data was that my students were unable to handle too much freedom. The students often had a difficult time completing assignments that did not have a 'right' answer. And as described previously, some students did not understand that they needed to use the suggested activities as a starting point for their assignments, rather than simply completing the minimum criteria provided in the contract guidelines. Many of the students agonized over assignments that required critical thinking and creativity. Students often started assignments, only to throw them away and start over again. Students continuously sought reassurance that their assignments were done correctly. One student told me that she was so accustomed to things being right or wrong that she did not know how to create something on her own. It is clear that at this stage my students need a more structured framework to complete their assignments. However, if students are to become engaged in the literature, they also need more experience of completing unstructured assignments that involve making choices and being creative.

As I considered the data from the survey on group work, several interesting results emerged. First, most students said they enjoyed group work sometimes, and only two students said they never liked to be involved in group work. These two students said that they did not like working

in groups because they would rather do the work themselves. The survey also indicated that students were sometimes frustrated with members in their groups, but most students indicated that everyone in the group contributed to the assignment always or most of the time.

Though most students enjoyed group work, in my observations I noted that groups spent a significant amount of time arguing over who would do which job for the assignment. In two groups, there was one person who wanted to tell the group what to do, which the other members seemed to resent. These two groups were not as productive as the other groups. Two of the remaining groups were very orderly and organized. Both groups quickly decided on group roles and went through the assignment in a very systematic and orderly way. Each person in the group participated and contributed to the assignment. In the last group, one group member had not done the reading necessary to complete one assignment, so the group would not let him participate. The group members told him to do the reading and then he could complete an extra portion of the assignment individually if he wanted to be included in the group.

In this phase of this project, the objective was to study the effect of student-directed learning on student engagement. My conclusion from analyzing student interviews, student work, and my classroom observations was that students' interest and engagement in activities and instruction did increase. However, it is clear to me that more structure and guidelines are necessary at this time for optimum student achievement. It is also clear that group work can effectively increase engagement periodically, but should not be used as the primary instructional method.

Student Attitudes Results

In general, the data revealed an improvement in student attitudes toward their assignments during this project. Throughout the project, I observed an increase in enthusiasm toward assignments and a willingness in my students to work harder. The students were constantly developing new ideas to be added to the next contract project list. Although this is an exciting result, it is not clear to me if this is a result of the actual student-directed work approach or if it is a result of students' interest in the novel we read. In a survey conducted at the end of the unit, 63% of students indicated that they liked choosing their own activities more than completing activities assigned by me. However, students were split on question 4, "I would rather have Mrs. Jordan teach the class than have students guide the learning." Nine students either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, eight students said they didn't know or didn't care, and ten students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The survey results also showed that 25 of the students felt they did better work when they were allowed to choose their own activities to complete.

In a final interview with five students, the students revealed to me that they liked choosing their own activities but would have liked more specific directions for completing assignments. They also stated that the class was too loosely structured. One of the students said, "Sometimes I felt like I wasn't learning a whole lot, because people would get off task as soon as you left the group." However, the majority of students said they would rather work in a group than work alone on class assignments, with only two students indicating they preferred to work alone.

Conclusions

As a result of my experiences during this research project, I concluded that students were more engaged in learning when they were given a choice about the assignments they completed, but most students preferred a mixture of student-directed and teacher-directed instruction. I plan to continue having students choose their own learning tools. I believe that with more coaching and practice my students will eventually become more comfortable guiding their own learning activities. It is also clear that group work is effective in engaging students periodically, but groups must be monitored carefully. Group work should not be used as the primary method for student-directed instruction.

Upon reflecting on my research, I have learned that I have been providing instruction to my students based on my own learning style and have not provided them with enough opportunities to exhibit their own talents and gifts. I often get frustrated with students when they want to know the 'right' answer, but through my struggles during this study I was constantly reminded that I, too, wanted to know what the 'right' way to complete this project and often sought guidance from my university collaborator in an attempt to achieve that goal.

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